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INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0475  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000109

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: WOMEN'S NGO WARNED REGARDING EMBASSY CONTACT

REF: A. 07 DAMASCUS 514  
[1](#)B. 06 DAMASCUS 5422

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C/NF) The Ministry of Social Affairs recently warned a prominent Syrian women's NGO that it risked losing its license if it had any unauthorized contact with foreigners or embassies. NGO staff believe the warning was issued after one of its board members reported to the SARG that Embassy Damascus had donated furniture for the NGO's new office. The warning is yet another example of the SARG's campaign to discourage Syrians from interacting with foreigners, no matter how innocuous the subject. While one part of the government is expressly interested in improved relations with the U.S., the working-level bureaucracy still adheres to Baath Party guidelines that equate all foreign outreach efforts to political threats. End summary.

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Women's NGO Receives Warning Letter  
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[1](#)2. (C/NF) The office manager for the NGO "MAWRED" (Modernizing and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development) informed Post that the MAWRED board had received a letter of warning from the Ministry of Social Affairs that MAWRED risked losing its license as an NGO if it had any unauthorized contact with foreigners or embassies. Our contact was concerned that one of MAWRED's board members had reported to the Ministry that MAWRED's Chairperson had solicited, and accepted, a donation of office furniture from the U.S. Embassy in August 2008. She speculated that the informer had reported the donation to curry favor with the Minister in the wake of the alleged U.S. raid into Syrian territory on October 26. She said that MAWRED had subsequently destroyed their internal paperwork and e-mails regarding the donation, and asked if Embassy personnel who were aware of the donation would not mention it.

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Background  
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[1](#)3. (C/NF) Founded in 2003 under the direct patronage of First Lady Asma Asad, MAWRED offers a year-long "incubator" program to help promising female entrepreneurs develop business plans, obtain capital and launch businesses. MAWRED opened an office in the same neighborhood as the U.S. Embassy in

June 2008. Soon thereafter, the MAWRED Chairperson -- who is also the local representative of Marriott -- sent a letter to the Chief of Mission soliciting a donation of furniture for the new office. Post then applied for, and received, an export license authorizing the donation of Embassy furniture that would have otherwise been auctioned. The items included a dining table and chairs (to be used as a conference table), a filing cabinet, and a refrigerator.

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Embassy Social Groups Under Scrutiny  
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¶4. (C/NF) From 2006-2008, Post had cultivated a "Syrian Women in Business" group by hosting quarterly rep events (reftels).

Many of the members were alumni of the International Visitors Program, and one had spent six months of the year 2000 in political security prison for forwarding an e-mail containing a cartoon of Bashar al-Asad. In May 2008, Post became aware that one member of the group was likely to have been reporting on the group's composition and activities to the SARG, and discreetly let the program grow dormant.

¶5. (C/NF) The MAWRED Chairperson had been a fairly consistent attendee at Post's rep events, and told us privately in the fall of 2008 that the Canadian Embassy had tried to create a similar businesswomen's group when Post's had become inactive. Once the Canadian-sponsored group had chosen officers, she said, the SARG had declared it an "illegal NGO" and ordered it disbanded. (Comment: Although our group had apparently existed longer than the Canadians' group, Post had not insisted that the participating women hold leadership positions. End comment.)

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Comment  
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¶6. (C/NF) MAWRED's situation typifies the challenges facing Syrian civil society, and the regime's perception that NGOs pose a serious threat. The MAWRED Chairperson is a strong, successful personality operating in a culture that generally resents others' successes. It's entirely possible she was the victim of a poison-pen letter from a jealous board member. Post had assessed, however, that MAWRED was less vulnerable to SARG pressure than other NGOs due to the First Lady's personal interest in its operations. This warning indicates that even an economic-focused NGO with buy-in from the Palace can run up against the police state's "red lines," which still prevail even as Syria's leaders -- including President Asad -- voice support for improved relations with the new U.S. administration.

CONNELLY